

Our recognition of avatars requires an act of assemblage: a bringing together of actuality and potentiality to negotiate the full force of their actant agency in spaces of making and learning.

Avatar|Avatar: Reflections in/on the Virtual

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Utilizing a documentary I created involving Dr. Christine Ballengee Morris, called *Avatar|Avatar*, I reflect on the concept of the virtual to understand the site of agency in art education. The documentary focuses on Ballengee Morris's work with her avatar Rain Winkler and explores the inter-relations of identity construction in both online (virtual) and offline (physical) spaces. In revisiting our encounter in the documentary, I extend the concept of the virtual through the simultaneous conditions of actuality and potentiality using the work of Manuel DeLanda and assemblage theory. My reflection in/on the virtual explores a broader actualization of the avatar as a site of research and understanding of subjectivity in art education. The video documentary and this written component should be viewed together.

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Figure 1. *Avatar|Avatar*, 2009. Before reading this article, please view the video by following this link: <https://vimeo.com/166695407>.

For all of us as we make, are made by, good passages and bad passages. As we make and are made by the desires for continuities and discontinuities. As we weave, are woven, in the partial connections, in the particular oscillations, and dis/continuities of normative subjectivities. (Moser & Law, 1999, p. 215)

In 2009, I created a documentary called *Avatar|Avatar* from a series of interviews I conducted with Dr. Christine Ballengee Morris both in her office and within the virtual realm of Second Life (SL). Unlike gaming environments, Second Life is an online world without any central objective besides building environments and interacting with the other 900,000 monthly users (Weinberger, 2015). In the video, our interview sessions go back and forth between Ballengee Morris and her SL avatar Rain Winkler. The doubling between identities and spaces is reflective of Ballengee Morris's (2009, 2013) own scholarship on

identity construction via her avatar¹ and through other art educators' work in the inter-relations of online (virtual) and offline (physical) spaces (Colman, 2005; Sutherlin & Counts, 2010). The video is bookended with clips from an educational film from the 1950s focused on civic issues such as understanding community via the roles played by important institutions like schools and hospitals, and shows young children building clay figurines of these community members. The intertwined footage is intended to present the traversing identities of people and representational figures such as avatars to reflect on identity and art pedagogy. While watching the video there is a definite sense of place and time through the montaged video segments: the maroon-orange tints of the campy educational film, the now-dated pixel surfaces of SL landscapes, and markers of time presented in the interfaces and people that are a part of the documentary. I revisit the documentary not to engage in an analysis of technology, but rather to consider the virtual as an

¹ I am focusing on Ballengee Morris's avatar Rain Winkler because she takes center stage in much of the documentary and in Ballengee Morris's own writing on the subject (2009, 2013), but there are other avatars that are part of her work.

idea that goes beyond the concept of virtual reality, which is typical of environments such as SL, to investigate the divide between actual and potential. Through the figure of the avatar, I reflect on the concept of the virtual to understand the site of agency in art education and explore the ways that actuality and potentiality are woven “[a]s we make and are made by the desires for continuities and discontinuities” (Moser & Law, 1999, p. 215). My aim in revisiting this short video is to highlight the artificial divide between the actual and potential that can be seen through the virtual, not in virtual reality as only an online phenomenon, but through the virtual as a real phenomenon in both offline and online worlds. To achieve this analysis, the figuration of the avatar is used to consider the virtual in our material world in the moments of making meaning as creative practitioners, art teachers and learners.

The concept of the virtual has often been conflated with being online, but this is an oversimplification of how potential may be recognized as a force in the material world. Katherine Hayles (1999) conceptualized the virtual as “*the cultural perception that material objects are interpenetrated by informational patterns*” (pp. 13-14, italics by Hayles). The relationship between data

and material is not a real or unreal one, but rather a complex series of feedback loops that “run between technologies and perceptions, artifacts and ideas, [and] have important implications for how historical change occurs” (Hayles, 1999, p. 14). Ballengee Morris is well aware of these fraught boundaries of materiality in her arts-based research practice involving her Second Life avatar Rain Winkler. Ballengee Morris (2009), speaking in the following quote as Rain Winkler, states, “Christine and I have explored our pro-

cess of developing as an avatar and what that means in Real Life (RL). She [Christine] is especially interested in the idea of visual aesthetics in relationship to SL and RL identities” (p. 92).

Ballengee Morris engages in a play between the materiality of SL and RL not only through her creation of humanoid characters in SL, but in her connections to avatar-like actuation in RL. We see in the video her talking about her own features as “me-eyes” and “me-hair” as sites of morphology similar to the algorithmic adjustments in a Second Life workspace. Through the avatar figure of Rain Winkler, Ballengee Morris explores body-making that ruminates on aging, identity, and forms of arts-based research that are both embodied and informational. Ballengee Morris extends



Figure 2. A scene from the documentary video showing the screencasting of an interview in Second Life with Serpent Mound and sweat lodge in the virtual landscape. Ballengee Morris-Winkler is the avatar figure on the right with wings.

this materiality of the body through the exploration of place manifest in digital representations of Serpent Mound, a sacred burial ground that has been reconstructed in SL, also seen in the video (see Figure 2). Ballengee Morris continues to form other avatars through the digital landscapes that include representations of Serpent Mound and a sweat lodge that are figurations of her Eastern Band Cherokee heritage and an extension of the actual and potential bodies present in her research.



Figure 3. A screenshot of an interview in Ballengee Morris' office. I am out of camera view, frame right.

These figurations of the avatar, while important to Ballengee Morris's work with Rain Winkler, begin to tell the divide of the virtual if we focus only on the manifestation of these avatars as online figurations. In order to better understand this tension of the avatar as both actual and potential feedback loops that decenter the subject, I extend the virtual through philosopher and social theorist Manuel DeLanda's (2006) assemblage theory. DeLanda's (2002) articulation of assemblage theory builds from a realist ontological view of the world that rejects formations of autonomy and denies any sort of transcendence to entities due to inner essence. Instead, ontology is understood as dynamic processes of both matter and energy involved in intensive differences that are immanent to the material world. Vital to the potentiality within these intensive differences is their virtual dimension, allowing entities to remain heterogeneous in a realist ontology, not reducing them to a singular essence, but instead placing them within a multiplicity. As critical anthropologist Arturo Escobar (2007) states in reference to assemblage theory, "actualization of the virtual in space and time entails the transformation

of intensive differences into extensive (readily visible) forms through historical processes involving interacting parts and emerging wholes" (p. 107). The dynamic dimension of the virtual in ontology helps to form one of the foundations to assemblage theory, which focuses on these interacting parts and emerging wholes. The virtual conceptually allows us to encounter the avatar assemblage of Ballengee Morris-Winkler-Serpent-Mound-Landscape expressing a multiplicity of this movement of embodied data as both bodies and places.

We also see an avatar assemblage in the young student in the opening of the video as he pierces his clay model's eye with the sudden realization that his teacher is also a member of the community. His act of puncturing the clay can be read as a moment signifying the actualization of an avatar assemblage that reflects back upon him as his potential for making and membership are realized within the art space as maker. I, myself, am assembled in avatars throughout the video as the orange-haired SL figure floating on the screen, in the typing that can be seen in the interface of the SL graphical user interface, and murmur-

ing in agreement off screen during the interview in Ballengee Morris's office (see Figure 3).

These avatar figurations point to a connected co-presence that is changing learners' abilities to collaborate and participate in a multiplicity of combinations and gives expression to a fractured sense of agency. The actualization of the virtual is the vital source of the avatars all around us in real life in spaces both digital and analog. As art educator Matthew Sutherlin (2014) states: "Any manifestation of an understanding, concept, or idea in a visual, verbal, and/or tangible form and its performance is an avatar" (p. 52). By understanding the virtual of assemblage theory, the doubling of Ballengee Morris-Winkler becomes an agentic force acting in and with what Coleman (2011) calls "x-reality," or the continuum of embodiment that is online and off. The vitality of the avatar is its acting within human and nonhuman social formations so that the "centredness of agentic responsibility is distributed into a dispersed network of interdependencies and co-responsibilities" (Lee & Stenner, 1999, p. 93). Through assemblage we find a way to re-inscribe the relatedness of avatars that are temporarily assembled and held together, not necessarily or absolutely, but through and with the avatars that form social ontologies. *Avatar|Avatar* extends the arts-based research on identity conducted by Ballengee Morris's assembling of the doubled entity of Ballengee Morris-Winkler through the virtual potentials harbored in the very algorithms that compose an avatar like Winkler. The avatar assemblage is extended through an analogue parallel in the ceramic figurines of crossing guards or nurses molded by the elementary students in the educational film clips that open and close the video. The virtual enables a critical material pedagogy that asks questions of access, toxicity, and materiality in a way that questions the political formations and power relationships of identity construction as well as the identity of material constructions.

To consider the divide between actual and potential in the virtual is a strategic movement to re-inscribe the method of assemblage: my search is constituted by what is assembled within a particular social ontology, and not in defining avatars or networks in their totality. Assembling the avatars of the

art classroom is seeing nonhumans in online discussion boards, galleries, budgets, kilns, pencils, mobile phones, and software, for example, as having impact, taking charge, pressuring, motivating desire, making and unmaking "dis/continuities" (Moser & Law, 1999, p. 215). As teachers and curriculum designers, we participate in constructing avatar assemblages as we articulate assessments related to standards, use materials, demonstrate software, create dialogic communities, and invest ourselves and our students in making art. The agentic forces of avatars within the assemblage that remain complicit in global flows of injustice, harbor proprietary knowledge repositories of elitist art economies, and contribute to unsustainable ecosystems of use and abuse all formed within the power dynamics of sociomaterial formations. In part, my focus on the avatar is seeing nonhumans as a critical movement akin to Jan Jagodzinski's (2013) call for recognizing the anonymous in that "anonymity exists as the overlap between the I and non-I, between marks of non-agency (literally no body) to literally possessing some body, which grants full agency" (p. 30). However, *Avatar|Avatar* reminds me of the dis/continuities of the social relation of materials and our impoverished understanding of *things* that impact our lives. Literally, our movement may be most powerful in recognizing *any-body* as we formulate "an experiment of potentiality that does not 'premeditate' the future, but rather opens it up" (Jagodzinski, 2013, p. 35). Our recognition of avatars requires an act of assemblage: a bringing together of actuality and potentiality to negotiate the full force of their actant agency in spaces of making and learning. Whether it be the sepia-toned faces of students sculpting figurines of important community members in clay at the opening of the video, the crowded populations of figurines on the desk of Ballengee Morris or the SL interface captured through the screencasting of our online interview, the assembling of avatars is the recognition of people and things as agents of change.

Notes

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